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SKUL, KPAO, OEXC
SUBJECT: OUTCOMES-BASED EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA-WILL IT STAY OR
WILL IT GO?

¶1. (U) Summary. An article appearing in the November 14 edition of the Cape Times asserts that the end may be near for South Africa's 12-year experiment with Outcomes-Based Education (OBE), a controversial pedagogical model adopted by the ANC Government in the mid-90s in the wake of the demise of apartheid. The article's claim that the fate of OBE is soon to be on the agenda of the ANC's national leadership is bolstered by a recent discussion between the CG and the rector of the University of the Western Cape Brian O'Connell. The rector is optimistic that ANC President Jacob Zuma understands that if education in South Africa is not reformed, the country's future is at risk. In contrast to the November 14 article, on November 21 the Mail and Guardian ran a piece entitled "OBE Here to Stay," which quoted Education Minister Naledi Pandor as saying the Ministry of Education has no intention of ditching OBE. End Summary.

¶2. (U) The November 14 edition of the Cape Times carries an article entitled "Outcomes-Based Education May Be On the Way Out." Based on a document purportedly leaked from "an education conference in Gauteng" last week, the article asserts that OBE must be reviewed and, if necessary, abolished. Among the reasons for scrapping OBE, according to the document, are badly trained teachers, under-resourced schools, unacceptably high illiteracy and innumeracy levels among learners, and dismal test scores when compared with international averages.

¶3. (U) While definitions of OBE vary, and indeed OBE is a notoriously slippery concept, one definition (Wikipedia's) of OBE is "a model of education that rejects the traditional focus on what the school provides to students, in favor of making students demonstrate that they 'know and are able to do' whatever the required outcomes are." In post-apartheid South Africa, OBE has meant (according to its detractors, who are legion) declining student performances, learners leaving schools without basic skills such as literacy and numeracy, and teachers who are confused and alienated by mystifying bureaucratic demands.

¶4. (U) On November 12, the CG met with Brian O'Connell, Rector of the University of the Western Cape. A former Fulbright scholar (Columbia), Western Cape Member of the Executive Council for Education, participant in the struggle, and long-time activist in the Western Cape, Professor O'Connell has made education in South Africa his life-long commitment. UWC was established circa 1960, specifically as the "coloured" university, and almost from its inception was involved in the anti-apartheid movement.

¶5. (U) Professor O'Connell spoke effusively and with great passion about his concern for the future of South Africa and the failure of the ANC government in the realm of education. Specifically, he lamented that the adoption of OBE by the ANC government in the mid-90s was a catastrophe and had led to a generation of uneducated South Africans - people who cannot read adequately, who cannot do math, who are illiterate in the basics of science and everything else. While he conceded that in theory, OBE was not necessarily a bad concept, in the South African context it had been warped by

political correctitude, and become a mantra among former struggle leaders, e.g. Kader Asmal, Minister of Education at the time, and others who chose to see it as the key to overcoming the racist apartheid system of the previous regime. Thus they had "thrown out the baby - mastery of the three Rs, solid grounding in the basics - Qthe baby - mastery of the three Rs, solid grounding in the basics - with the bathwater of apartheid discrimination." Excellence in education has been forgotten. O'Connell said that many proponents of OBE feel that if a student from a formerly disadvantaged group can not master the material, the problem is not the student, the problem is the material. The result is that everyone advances to the next grade, but nobody learns anything. Thus, the greater goal of making Africans take charge of their own futures, through mastery of modern science and technology, and thereby taking control of a modern economy, has been hopelessly compromised.

¶6. (U) Tears fell from his eyes as O'Connell explained how, in meeting after meeting with the ANC leadership on education, he was branded a traitor for pleading the case of excellence in education. OBE, or at least the warped ANC version of it, was not to be questioned. He did not, however, give up hope. Recently he had gained access to the ear of Jacob Zuma, and he was optimistic that he was being heard now. O'Connell stated, "Zuma has seen the light with regards to abolishing OBE." O'Connell believes that the entire system can be turned around in 10 years. For his part, he is pushing forward with his plans to make UWC a center for academic excellence for African students; he points to the construction of a new science center on campus as a symbol of the university's determination not to abandon the goal of teaching science to African students. If the Cape Times article is to be trusted, O'Connell's optimism may be justified.

¶7. (U) In contrast to the Cape Times article, the November 21 issue

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of the Mail and Guardian ran an article entitled "OBE Here to Stay."

In the article Minister of Education, Naledi Pandor said the education department has no intention of ditching OBE. The Minister continued by saying the system has already been modified and would continue to be tweaked. Pandor also revealed her plans to set up a special curriculum implementation committee to look at: expanding and improving teacher training, reducing the current eight learning areas in grades four through seven, and improving classroom materials. In the article Pandor addressed the fact that over the past week, the media has reported that OBE would be scrapped. Furthermore, Pandor said she could not understand how the media had inferred that OBE would be terminated based on the document produced at a recent meeting which looked at the future of OBE. She noted that OBE was a necessary change for South Africa and that South Africa needs to "make it work." She continued by saying, "it would be an absolute disaster to change it, as we have got buy-in." In order to make OBE work, South Africa must look at improved implementation rather than scrapping the program. Minister Pandor emphasized that the SAG has already altered OBE from its original approach and that learning outcomes are used as the basis for OBE.

¶8. (U) Comment. OBE is a controversial subject in SA. When OBE was first introduced in SA, many viewed it as a way of overcoming the apartheid system of the previous regime by creating equal educational opportunities for blacks and coloureds. Unfortunately, many feel that OBE has not done what it set out to do, namely to provide equal access and equal opportunities to all races. Today, under the OBE system many students are failing and SA is failing to produce graduates who are qualified to find good jobs in the workplace, further adding to SA's high unemployment rate. The matric rates have steadily declined in the disadvantaged areas since the implementation of OBE in the mid 90s. In the townships, ninety percent of the students fail math and science in their matrices, whereas wealthy schools have a hundred percent pass rate. Many of the university rectors feel OBE should be disbanded and that a new system based on higher standards and critical thinking should be introduced. End comment.